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ABSTRACT

The heightened interest in college program review is traced to a widespread interest in improving educational quality and the need to respond creatively to financial constraints and external expectations for accountability. Current program reviews have also been designed to aid in decision making about resource reallocation and program discontinuance. Most academic program reviews draw on one or more of several formal evaluation models: goal-based, responsive, decision-making, or connoisseurship models. The underlying objective of quality is defined by four different perspectives: the reputational view, the resources view, the outcomes view, and the value-added view. Most institutions assess quality by adopting aspects of all four views. The continued existence and growth of program review processes suggest that the efforts are supported and that the results can be beneficial, but more systematic study of their effects is needed. (LB)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Academic Program Reviews

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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ASHE – ERIC

This Executive Summary is a digest of a new full-length report in the ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report series, prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education and published by the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Each report is a definitive review of the literature and institutional practice on a single critical issue. Many administrators subscribe to the series and circulate reports to staff and faculty committees with responsibility in a report's topic area. Reports are available on a subscription basis for $85 per year ($42.50 outside the U.S.). Subscriptions begin with Report 1 and conclude with Report 8 of the current series year. Single copies, at $7.50 each, are available from: Association for the Study of Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, D.C. 20036. Phone (202) 296-2597.

Within the last few years, the role of academic program review has emerged as one of the most salient issues in American higher education. Nestled within a context of accountability, program reviews have become a dominant and controversial activity at the institutional authority varies greatly, higher education agencies in all 50 states now conduct state-level reviews; 28 of those agencies have authority to discontinue programs. Moreover, a majority of the multicampus systems have introduced program reviews, and over three-fourths of the nation's colleges and universities employ some type of program review (Barak 1982). The heightened interest in program review can be traced to a widespread interest in improving program quality and the need to respond creatively to severe financial constraints and to external constituencies' expectations for accountability.

The literature contains a generous amount of controversy regarding the purposes, processes, and outcomes of program review. The intent of this monograph is to illuminate this terrain: to capture the diverse institutional approaches to review, to examine the central issues, and to reflect on ways in which program review might be improved. Toward that end, the report is based on a review of the literature and an analysis of program review practices at 30 representative institutions.

What Distinguishes Current Program Reviews?

Colleges and universities have a long-standing tradition of program evaluation, a tradition that can be traced from colonial and antebellum colleges to modern American universities. Until well into this century, program reviews were viewed largely as internal matters, initiated most often to reform and revitalize the curriculum. The idea that program reviews should be conducted to demonstrate accountability to external constituencies is a phenomenon of the twentieth century. The gradual development of regional and professional accrediting associations and the creation of statewide governing and coordinating boards are at least partly the result of a belief that programs must be responsive to the needs and expectations of external as well as internal audiences.

Especially in the last several years, program reviews have been designed to achieve another major objective: aiding those making decisions about the reallocation of resources and program discontinuance. Thus, a broad range of expectations now exists for program review in higher education. Program improvement, accountability to external constituencies, and resource reallocation are the purposes cited most often. Despite this growth in expectations, little evidence suggests that an evaluation system can be designed to address multiple purposes simultaneousiy. It is especially difficult to pursue both program improvement and resource reallocation at the same time (Barak 1982; George 1982), and an institution's interests are served best if reviews focused on program improvement are conducted separately from those concerned with reallocating resources.

What Do Formal Evaluation Models Contribute?

Program reviews at most institutions draw heavily on one or more of several models: goal-based, responsive, decision-making, or connoisseurship. Although these models are seldom explicitly identified in

descriptions of institutional review processes, they can be inferred from the procedures used.

The *goal-based model* has had the most influence, offering the advantages of systematic attention to how a program has performed in relation to what was intended and of a concern for the factors contributing to success or failure. The characteristic of the *responsive model* that has influenced program reviews in higher education is the attention given to program activities and effects, regardless of what its goals might be. The central concern of an evaluation, according to a proponent of responsive evaluation, ought to be the issues and concerns of those who have an interest in the program, not how a program has performed relative to its formal goal statements.

The major contribution of the *decision-making model* to program review in higher education is the explicit attempt to link evaluations with decision making, thus focusing the evaluation and increasing the likelihood that results will be used. The *connoisseurship model* of evaluation has a long tradition in higher education. It relies heavily on the perspectives and judgments of experts, which are valued because of the individual's assumed superior knowledge and expertise and a commonly shared value system (Gardner 1977).

How Should Quality Be Assessed?

The assessment of quality has generated more confusion and debate than any other issue for those engaged in program review. Pressure to define what quality means and what types of information should be collected has always existed, but interest has been heightened by the relatively recent emphasis on program review for resource reallocation and retrenchment.

Four different perspectives have been offered on how quality should be defined: the reputational view, the resources view, the outcomes view, and the value-added view. The *reputational view* assumes that quality cannot be measured directly and is best inferred through the judgments of experts in the field. The *resources view* emphasizes the human, financial, and physical assets available to a program. It assumes that high quality exists when resources like excellent students, productive and highly qualified faculty, and modern facilities and equipment are prevalent.

The *outcomes view* of quality draws attention from resources to the quality of the product. Faculty publications, students' accomplishments following graduation, and employers' satisfaction with program graduates, for example, are indicators used. The problem with the outcomes view is that the program's contribution to the success of graduates, for example, is not isolated. It is assumed that if the graduate is a success, the program is a success.

The *value-added view* directs attention to what the institution has contributed to a student's education (Astin 1980). The focus of the value-added view is on what a student has learned while enrolled. In turn, programs are judged on how much they add to a student's knowledge and personal development. The difficulty with this view of quality is how to isolate that contribution.

Most institutions assess quality by adopting aspects of all four views. The assumption is that quality has multiple dimensions and, in turn, that multiple indicators should be used for its assessment. A large number of quantitative and qualitative indicators have been suggested for making such assessments (Clark, Hartnett, and Baird 1976; Conrad and Blackburn 1985).

Do Program Reviews Make a Difference?

Perhaps the most significant issue relating to program review is the effect of the considerable activity at all levels of higher education. The assessment of impact requires that attention be given to the longer-term effects of decisions that are made, that is, whether a program is stronger, more efficient, or of higher quality. The major criterion to use in assessing impact is whether an evaluation makes a system function better (Cronbach 1977).

Only a few studies have analyzed impact systematically. The University of California (Smith 1979) and the University of Iowa (Barak 1982) benefited from program reviews, including providing a stimulus for change and improving knowledge among decision makers about programs. Not all analyses of impact are as positive, however. A small number of studies (Skubal 1979; Smith 1979) have focused on cost savings and have found that little money is saved—that, in fact, reviews frequently require an increased commitment. Program reviews can have negative effects—unwarranted anxiety, diversion of time from teaching and research, and unfulfilled promises and expectations (Seeley 1981).

The continued existence and growth of program review processes suggest that such efforts are supported and that the results can be beneficial. Given the plethora of program reviews at all levels of higher education, the need to study the effects of such reviews more systematically is urgent.

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